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CIA Can't Always Rebut Critics

How former CIA Director George Bush did and did not answer questions put by reporters in Charleston a couple of days ago was instructive as to one of the problems besetting the Central Intelligence Agency.

Were payments such as those reportedly made to Jordan's King Hussein standard operating procedure for the CIA? Published accounts of such payments, Mr. Bush replied, were "full of untruths and half-truths." The President, Mr. Bush added, had looked into the matter and found "nothing improper or illegal." Beyond that, Mr. Bush would not go. He was, he said, obligated not to discuss sources or methods in connection with CIA affairs.

That obligation, rooted in the conviction that the CIA cannot effectively operate entirely in the sunshine, is the cause of frustration that Mr. Bush and others like him feel when the agency is under scrutiny or attack. The CIA isn't free to defend itself against charges such as those aired in the congressional hearings. To mount a defense would involve disclosures jeopardizing the covert means of gathering intelligence. Covers would be blown, and foreign contacts imperiled. Telling the whole truth is seldom done in the competitive game of international intelligence because of the costly consequences.

That's not to say the alleged payments to Jordan's king were well spent insofar as the intelligence return to the U.S. is concerned. Nor is it to say that CIA and other intelligence

operations should never be questioned about how tax money is expended.

It is to say that the limitations imposed by the nature of its mission should be considered when judgments are made on the right or wrong of affairs linked to the CIA. It is because the CIA must operate in silence if it is to operate effectively that responsible leadership and prudent oversight are essential.